

"Tell Me About Yourself"

The Toughest Question in the Interview

By Don Straits

When you, as a job seeker, are asked the most common, and toughest, interview question, "Tell me about yourself," your answer can make or break you as a candidate. Usually job seekers will respond with their "30 second commercial," and then elaborate on their background. While almost every career book and career counselor will tell you that is the appropriate response, I totally disagree.

Many people fail in their job search because they are too often focused on what they want in a job including industry, type of position, location, income, benefits, and work environment. Their "30 second commercial" is centered around this premise. The commercial describes the job seeker's career history and what they are looking for. Too often, this is in direct contrast to what employers are looking for.

There are two dominant reasons why job seekers are successful in the job search. The first is focusing on the needs of the organization. The second is focusing on the needs of the people within that organization. In this article, we are going to examine how to focus on the needs of the people within organizations. This will assist in rethinking your response to that all-important question, "Tell me about yourself."

In order to learn how to respond to the needs of the interviewer, let's first learn more about ourselves. We can then apply that knowledge about ourselves to knowing how to understand and respond to the needs of others.

Most social psychologists recognize four basic personality styles: Analytical, Amiable, Expressive, and Driver. Usually, each of us exhibits personality characteristics unique to one of the styles. However, we also possess characteristics to a lesser degree in the other styles. To determine your unique style, you can take a Myers-Briggs assessment or go to the following site for a free Keirsey Temperament Sorter assessment test: www.keirsey.com

Here are the characteristics that are most commonly associated with each of the styles:

Analytical:

Positive Traits: Precise, Methodical, Organized, Rational, Detail Oriented

Negative Traits: Critical, Formal, Uncertain, Judgmental, Picky

Amiable:

Positive Traits: Cooperative, Dependable, Warm, Listener, Negotiator

Negative Traits: Undisciplined, Dependent, Submissive, Overly Cautious, Conforming

Expressive:

Positive Traits: Enthusiastic, Persuasive, Outgoing, Positive, Communicator

Negative Traits: Ego Centered, Emotional, Exploitive, Opinionated, Reacting

Driver:

Positive Traits: Persistent, Independent, Decision Maker, Effective, Strong Willed

Negative Traits: Aggressive, Strict, Intense, Relentless, Rigid

Gaining an in-depth understanding of your personality style has enormous value in your career as well as your personal life. However, our focus today is learning how to use this knowledge to make you more successful in your job search.

Once you have learned about your own style and have studied the other styles, I encourage you to have a little fun in trying to determine the styles of others. When you meet someone for the first time, try to identify his or her style within the first two minutes. You can often identify styles by observing a person's demeanor, conversation, body language, appearance, and possessions.

To demonstrate what I mean, let's take some examples from the business world. While there are always exceptions, generally speaking the styles fit the example.

Analytical Style: Financial Manager (or programmers, engineers, and accountants). They like systems and procedures. They are slow to make decisions because they will analyze things to death—but their decisions are usually very sound. They prefer working independently and are usually not very good in team environments, but they are also dependable. They buy cars with good resale value and great gas mileage. They are conservative dressers. At the party, they want to know why so much money was spent on Michelob when we could have purchased Busch. They come to the party with their laptops.

Amiable Style: Human Resources Manager. Very people-focused. They are dependable, loyal and easygoing; very compassionate. They will give you the shirt off their backs and the last nickel in their pockets. They are good listeners and value team players who don't "rock the boat." They are usually conformists and followers—rarely leaders. They avoid conflict and are not good decision makers. They drive four-door sedans or mini-vans to take the kids to sporting events. They usually clean up after the party is over.

Expressive Style: Sales Manager. Very outgoing and enthusiastic, with a high energy level. They are also great idea generators, but usually do not have the ability to see the idea through to completion. Very opinionated and egotistical. Money motivated. They can be good communicators. They prefer to direct and control rather than ask and listen. They drive red convertibles with great stereos; to heck with the gas mileage. They come up with the idea for a company party, but never help clean up. They are on their way to another party.

Driver: Corporate CEO. Intelligent, intense, focused, relentless. They thrive on the thrill of the challenge and the internal motivation to succeed. Money is only a measure of success; it is not the driving factor. They are results/performance oriented. They

have compassion for the truly disadvantaged, but absolutely no patience or tolerance for the lazy or whiners. They drive prestige cars, not because the car attracts attention, but because it was a wise investment. They want to know why we had a party; what were the benefits of the party, and did we invite the banker?

Ok, now you are really getting some insight into your style and the style of others. It is time for the interviews. Throw out your 30-second commercial. Think on your feet.

You will be interviewing with the human resource manager, the finance manager, the sales manager, and the CEO. The first question each of them will ask you is: "Tell me about yourself." How should you respond? Remember the second reason for succeeding in a job search: focus on the needs of the people in the organization. Here are just a few examples of how to respond to that question:

"Tell me about yourself?"

Response to Finance Manager: "I have been successful in my career by making well-thought-out decisions based on careful analysis of all factors. I approach problems with logic and sound reasoning. I would enjoy working with you in developing the appropriate systems and procedures to make our two departments function efficiently together."

Response to Human Resource Manager: "My career has been characterized by my ability to work well with diverse teams. I seek out opportunities to involve others in the decision-making process. This collaboration and communication is what has enabled me to achieve success in my department. People are the most valuable resource of any organization."

Response to Sales Manager: "Throughout my career I have always adhered to the principle that everyone in the organization must be sales-focused. My department is always trained in customer service, providing outstanding support to the sales team and to our customers. Without sales, the rest of use would not have a job. I look forward to helping you drive sales in any way possible."

Response to CEO: "I have achieved success in my career because I have been focused on the bottom line. I have always sought out innovative solutions to challenging problems to maximize profitability. Regardless of the task or challenge, I always established benchmarks of performance and standards of excellence. I have never sought to maintain the "status quo." An organization that does not change and grow will die. I would enjoy working with you to help define new market opportunities in order to achieve the organization's goals."

In each instance, we responded to the "needs of the individual." It is almost guaranteed that, when you respond appropriately to the diverse needs of the different managers, you will become the standard by which all of the other candidates will be measured.

I challenge you to learn about your personality and leadership style, learn about the styles of others, and learn how to think on your feet when responding to questions. Whether you are seeking a job or you are gainfully employed, by understanding the needs of others you will become a more valuable person, employee, manager and leader.